

crooked and crustacean-like, struggled in the fine-mesh net. Clete had caught a dozen of them, and there were at least a dozen more floating free in the pool, waving their legs, waiting for him. This was therapy for Clete, walking without his cane, using both arms to wield his pole.

Ellis' head popped up over the fence from next door and said, "Hey, Clete! Mind if I come over? I got a dirty movie we can watch." He held up a plastic video case and leered. "Come on over, Ellis," said Clete. Words just seemed to be falling together for him these days, just falling into place. Ellis dropped the movie over the fence onto the grass and began to hoist himself up behind it. The old fence wiggled and swayed when he hooked his instep on the top board, and when he got his body up onto the fence top, ready to drop down, the board he was gripping snapped and Ellis tumbled hard to the ground.

Clete dropped his pole. The June bugs he had captured floated out of the net. "Are you O.K., Ellis?" he said. He walked to his fallen friend, his gait jerky and spastic in his excitement. If he could concentrate on his walk, he could keep it smooth, but the goal now was to move from point A to Point B. He didn't care if he looked good doing it; Ellis might have been hurt.

He wasn't, though. He had the wind knocked out of him and his shoulder was sore, but he was O.K. He picked up his movie and they went inside to watch it.

But it wasn't the movie they thought it would be. It was The Little Mermaid, one of Ellis' young son's cartoon movies. "What the fuck is this?" said Ellis, leaning forward in his chair and gripping the arm rests. "What the fuck?" said Clete. A pretty little girl in a sea shell cup bikini top was swimming around under the sea. "What the hell is this?" Ellis said.

The phone rang. Ellis answered it for Clete. It was Ellis' wife Ruth. She and Clete's wife Juanita were having coffee and chatting next door. "How do you like the movie, Ellis?" she said. Then both ladies broke up laughing. Ellis held the receiver away from his ear so Clete could hear them. "Bitches," said Ellis, pointing to the phone. "Yeah, bitches," said Clete.

THE GRAVITY VARIATIONS

Ellis Leahy bounced on the diving board in Clete Johnson's back yard. His hairy belly jiggled, and his swimming trunks rode so low that the crack in his ass was revealed. "Do us a favor and put a God-damned shirt on, Ellis,"

Evelyn Lamuraglia shouted from her lawn chair at the pool-side table. Ellis flipped her and the rest of the cackling ladies at the table the bird and he shouted to the guys in the pool, "Hey, fellas. Cannonball contest! Let's get the ladies all wet." Ellis' wife Ruth shouted, "You'll be very sorry if even one drop of that water dilutes this drink," pointing to the pink wine cooler that sat on the metal table top in front of her. Clete's wife Juanita moved the pitcher inside the sliding glass door, just to be safe.

Ellis bounced three times on the board and flew skyward and curled into the fetal position. But gravity — always capricious in the neighborhood of the Johnson pool — threw a monkey wrench into the plans. Ellis' descent was as slow as a feather's. He settled down on the turquoise sea like a weightless hair ball. Then he uncurled and thrashed about and said, "Oh, fuck me in the ass. When the hell are you gonna do something about this pool, Clete?" as his contortions broke the surface tension and allowed him to sink. The ladies all laughed, and Butch gave the diving board a try, and so did Clete. The results remained the same. The ladies taunted and giggled and drank their wine, and Ruth gave the boys a big raspberry.

When the guys came out of the pool to raid the ice chest for their beers, the ladies — well aware of the flip-flops and wobbles that gravity went through in the vicinity of the pool — gave their own cannonball contest a try: Ruth bounced on the diving board. The rest of the ladies grinned, because the tip of the board kissed the water under Ruth's weight as the increase in gravity pulled a beach ball from the patio into the pool....

Ruth just seemed to fall off the board, no catapult action at all, and the hyper-gravity sucked her down through the water (that looked like blue mercury at those ten Gs) and drove her to the cement bottom and held her there for a terrifying ten seconds. Then gravity popped back to normal, and Ruth burst from the surface of the pool, gasping and coughing. Evelyn dove in and swam over to her and said, "You O.K., Ruthie girl?" The men chuckled and drank their beers, and Butch, the only unmarried guy in the crowd, said, "Looks like you need to go on a little diet there, Ruthie-girl; you weren't so heavy that type of shit wouldn't happen." Then he laughed like a donkey: "HA HA HA HA." The rest of the men were silent as they backed away from their friend, and Ruth did her powerful breast stroke to the side of the pool and shot up onto the patio in a belly-first slide. She caught up to Butch at the sliding glass door, and she grabbed him, hoisted him up over her head and threw him at the pool. He skipped twice on the water's surface and then tumbled across the lawn and came to a crashing halt as he collided with Clete's aluminum tool

shed, and the rest of the men tiptoed along the fence — silently, like mice — to go to their friend to see if he was O.K.

THE DANCIN' MACHINE

Some say that Clete's not the man he used to be before his stroke, but you have to watch very closely to make an argument for that point when you see the old boy out on the dance floor....

Clete has made wise and graceful compensation for his game leg by adopting a less freewheeling dance style than he used before his vascular accident — a more contained and tighter mambo, a small-orbit jitterbug with Juanita circling him as he uses his game leg as a pivot, a shuffle-step cha-cha that keeps his center of gravity directly over his pelvis.

Gravity, always a foe, has really been a bugaboo during Clete's recovery, taking advantage of his weakened neural impulses. And when the impulses go beyond weak, when they blink out altogether, gravity is waiting.

Even now, when it appears that Clete has gotten back damned near everything, a sciatic short-circuit will send him to the floor. But Clete compensates; he incorporates the fall into his act — he spins around on the polished linoleum, torques into a headstand and flips back to his feet, glides right back into whatever dance step he and Juanita were involved in, while the edge-of-the-dance-floor on-lookers hoot and howl, and say to each other, "He's a lean, mean, dancin' machine, ain't he?"

VARIATION ON A BLUES THEME, Part 1

The management at the Loma Alta Mall hired a brass band with a female vocalist to perform in front of the fountain outside of The May Company during the Labor Day Sale. The four horn men unpacked their instruments and warmed up, honked and squealed for a minute, and then the vocalist, Evelyn, a very thin middle-aged woman with a gleaming red bouffant, purred into the microphone, "We'd like to do a little blues number for you."

The shoppers milled and window-browsed, power-walked and strolled, ignoring Evelyn and her three freshly-coiffed back-up singers, until the band tooted into the opening number, and Evelyn began to belt out: